

# Assault Following Longstanding Tensions

*A girl assaulted another girl with a vodka bottle. Both girls saw themselves as the victims.*

There comes a moment in many Restorative Conferences when the facilitators seem to vanish. It's as if the two protagonists, the 'victim' and the 'offender' are alone in the room. The hurt that has come between them has been exposed, and both parties are anxious to close the gap and find a way towards healing. The process is now theirs, and the facilitators, who have been holding the ground between them, fade into silence. Jodie and Marcia had fallen out years ago, and the bitterness spilled over into violence one night, when Marcia struck Jodie on the head with a vodka bottle. Jodie was rushed to hospital where she was treated for a deep gash. Months later she was still suffering severe headaches on that side of her head. Marcia had insisted before the conference that Jodie had struck the first blow, and denied having drunk alcohol prior to the offence. I visited both families at home in preparation for the conference, and I was anxious that the conference might dissolve into dispute about facts. Those fears were ungrounded, largely due to the way restorative conferences work. At the outset of the conference I asked everyone to speak honestly and truthfully, to respect and listen to one another, to focus more on what they were thinking and feeling at the time and the impact since, not so much on what they had or hadn't done. It was moving to witness these two teenagers sorting it out for themselves.

Marcia admitted for the first time that she'd been drunk that night. She apologised several times to Jodie, and said how shocked she was that she was capable of such an attack. She then thanked Jodie for not pressing for prosecution. The case might have warranted a court sentence for Grievous

Bodily

Harm, but was dealt with by a Final Warning. The transformation came when Jodie herself began to apologise. She admitted that she had listened to and believed the rumours and gossip going around about Marcia. She acknowledged that Marcia had been having a hard time at home. Both girls said that the divisive name-calling and general bitchiness of their 'friends' had led them into conflict, and both were now determined to put an end to it. They took the first courageous step to resolve these issues, in a process that transforms adversaries into allies, and does away with the mentality of 'victim' and 'offender'. About five months after the conference, I was asked by the Youth Offending Team Manager to invite some people who had been involved in a restorative process to a Youth Offending Team event. I was delighted

that Jodie and her mother wanted to come (Marcia and her mother said they would have liked to attend but weren't available). Jodie said that as a result of the restorative conference she now felt safe, and was able to meet Marcia in passing without fear or anxiety. They wouldn't ever be friends, she said, but they could now get on with their lives. I consider the meeting to have been successful, based on the response of the victim's and offender's families when contacted five days after the conference, and the both girls' feelings several months later. And to our knowledge the offender hasn't been charged with another offence.